

Mayor's column for
The Beacon
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During the public presentations presented by the Port of Edmonds about the ongoing redevelopment efforts with Harbor Square and private property owners, I have heard some people ask, "Why doesn't the City buy the property and turn it into a park?"

One would think after the public debate over the purchase of property from the school district to create a park in southwest Edmonds, that everyone would be up to speed about the process of buying land for park purposes. But let's refresh anyway!

When we plan a park in the city, it is added to the Parks Comprehensive Plan, and that is folded into the City's overall comprehensive plan. A park at this site has never been discussed by the public or the Council and certainly not added into any of our comprehensive plans. Currently that site is surrounded by Brackett's North and South, Olympic Beach, the Edmonds Marsh, Marina Beach, and City Park.

In the latest comprehensive plan approved by the City Council in December 2006, there is no mention of creating a park in that area. In fact, the plan states that the area should be developed "according to a mixed use master plan" and "could provide significant opportunity for public/private partnerships."

So current vision and planning by the City Council precludes buying the land for a park and, in fact, their policy lists a different vision altogether. Comprehensive plans are created in concert with the public during public hearings and council deliberations. Councils are often taken to task for their lack of vision and planning; yet, on a whim, they are asked to ignore the policy they created.

Despite those caveats, I took the bull by the horns (so to speak) and went straight to the horse's mouth (so to speak) to find out whether there was any interest on the part of the property owner for selling his property to the City. For clarity sake, we are talking about the old Safeway (antique mall) property owned by the Edmonds Shopping Center group. It was assessed on the County tax rolls at \$6.8 million in 2007 and at \$9.7 million for 2008.

I received a written proposal from the property owner speaking to his interest in selling the property to the City. And he is interested—very interested—to the tune of \$16 million. It's an expensive tune! As CEO of the City, I'm not interested in playing that tune—or even humming along!

Even if the Council were willing to go down that road, we'd have to borrow money to make it happen. We could apply for some grants, I suppose, but the nature of grant funding requires that we not pay over appraised value for the purchase. I suspect that the asking price is significantly higher than an appraisal would come back at. And that's really not the big picture issue anyway.

That property should be developed in some form of a mixed-use development. It doesn't have to be the current proposal. It could be another, as yet unconceived, proposal. But the bottom line is that the benefit to the community of some form of new retail stores, some new office space, and additional housing stock far outweighs the creation of a park in an area already packed with parks in a city already rich with parks.

Again, this isn't an endorsement of the current project being proposed, since the group hasn't settled on a plan or design amongst themselves yet anyway. This is simply in response to those who say the City should buy the land for park. I believe that to be a bad idea.